

Remarks at the National Association of Counties Legislative Conference
February 14, 2023

Hello, hello! Thank you, Madam President. Please, have a seat. Thank you. Thank you, thank you, thank you. Thank you.

Denise, thanks for your leadership of this organization. You're right, I'm a county guy.

You know, one of the things, for real, is that one of the things you learn when you start off—and I had the great honor of being a county councilperson in the—New Castle County. We have—we're like a miniature Illinois. We have—one county has about 60 percent of the State's population.

So a county commissioner or a county councilperson has a district that's, I think, seven times larger than a State rep and three times bigger than a State senator.

But what I learned early on: If you're in the county, you've got to go through someone else to get help. You've got to go to the Governor. You've got to go to your State legislator. You've got to go to the State senators. And guess what? I stopped that. *[Laughter]* No kidding.

Because I'm telling you—you know, one of the things that we expect people to do is, we think that people are, like us, very familiar with all the detail of——

[At this point, the President picked up a handheld microphone.]

Is this working? Very familiar with all the detail of how government works. They don't know whether there's a pothole in their front—in their side street, whether it's a county, a State, a—they don't know who's responsible.

And they come to the county all the time—at least that was my experience in New Castle County. And when you don't have the same funding that you have for these other programs, you find out—you know, it's just hard.

And one of the things that I found out early on was: We always did better when there was direct funding for the things that related to the county.

I think it's one of the hardest jobs—no, I really mean it. I'm not being solicitous. I think it's one of the hardest jobs in politics. How many of you knocked on a door and said: "My name is so-and-so. I'm running for county commissioner." And they look at you and go, "Oh, um, uh." *[Laughter]* "Yes"—"You want to know what the county commissioner does, aren't you?" *[Laughter]* "Well, yes."

So I—no, I sincerely mean it. And so I want to thank—begin by thanking you all for what you do. Thank you, thank you, thank you. I ran for the United States Senate because being in the county council was too hard. *[Laughter]*

Look, I'm glad to be here with all of you.

Shootings at Michigan State University in East Lansing, Michigan

Before I begin, I want to take a moment to say our hearts are with the students and the families at Michigan State University. Last night I spoke with Governor Whitmer. And the FBI and additional Federal law enforcement are on the ground assisting the State and local folks. And three lives have been lost and five seriously injured.

And it's a family's worst nightmare, and it's happening far too often in this country. Far too often. While we gather more information, there's one thing we do know to be true: We have to do something to stop the gun violence ripping apart our communities. Ripping apart.

And today marks 5 years—5 years to the day—that 14 students and 3 educators lost their lives in Parkland, Florida. I met every one of those families, spent time with them all.

And a lot of you here have to confront violence in your communities every single day.

We took a big step toward passing the most significant bipartisan gun legislation in 30 years—ghost guns and other things, background checks. But there's a lot more work to do. And I'm committing to getting it done with all of you.

Some of you know I—that—and I'm going to say something that's always controversial, but there is no rationale for assault weapons and magazines that hold 50, 70 bullets. We got it done once. We're going to do it again.

National Association of Counties Legislative Conference

But anyway, look, the—some of you know, as I said, I started as a councilman in Delaware. And the county executive in New Castle County is here today, Matt Meyer. Matt, where are you sitting? Matt's hiding because—no, I'm kidding, Matt. Good to see you, pal. And Matt knows what I'm talking about.

When people have a problem, they've got your number. They knock on your door. Not only you, but your spouses can't go to the grocery store, the gas station. Can't show up at the—and without "Can you fix my such and such." [*Laughter*]

Well, I've always had enormous respect for the job you do. You're the ones who make people—make sure everything gets fixed; the libraries stay open late so kids can do their homework; the sewer system isn't backing up into the creek and their basements. So you make sure that your public health department runs smoothly, that your communities are meeting the needs of a growing and changing population, that your residents have access to affordable housing, that you're investing in public safety.

They're huge responsibilities you have. They touch every aspect of people's lives. And when your constituents call needing help with a State problem or a city problem, you take the call, and you get it done. You end up calling to make sure you find out how to get it done.

Simply put, you get things done. You're used to getting things done, fixing problems. And that's because you know the measure of success isn't how partisan points are scored, but it's how you fix a problem, can you fix the problem, whether you're a Democrat, Republican, or Independent.

We're often told that Democrats and Republicans can't work together. And you know, there's always been competition. But, in the last 10, 12 years, it's been particularly tough. But as I told my friends in Congress in my State of the Union Address last week, I believe people sent us a clear message in this off-year election: Fighting for the sake of fighting gets us nowhere. We're here to get things done. That's why we got—that's why we got elected.

And it's always been my vision. And I really mean it: It's always been my vision. And I know it's yours as well. Over the past 2 years, we've been delivering on that vision. When I came to office, the pandemic was raging, and our economy was reeling. But together, we acted.

Less than 2 months after I took office, the American Rescue Plan led to the fastest economic recovery of any major economy in the world.

And I know that at the beginning of the crisis, like you did, that strengthening State and local governments was the key to our recovery. But when the CARE Act was passed—before that—before I was—came into office—just before—under the previous administration, some of you had to go to your State legislatures to get permission to use the money that was in the act.

I used to be that—I used to be in your shoes. Only 120 counties in the United States of America got help in that CARES Act. There was a lot of money but only twenty—120 counties. When I signed the American Rescue Plan, it sent \$350 billion for the first time in history to every State, city, and county in America.

We made sure—[applause]—all of you, over 3,000 counties, got direct funding because I know when we empower you directly, you get the job done. Three thousand counties.

That money helped shore up your budgets, avoid painful layoffs, put cops back on the beat, firefighters back on the job, teachers in the classroom, nurses in the emergency rooms.

And it worked. Since then, because of you, we've created 12 and a half—12 million jobs, just a half a million alone last month alone. And we've now created more jobs in 2 years than any administration ever created in a 4-year term. And, folks, the unemployment rate is 3.4 percent, at a 50-year low.

We've seen record small-business applications. And by the way, every time someone makes an application for a small business, that's hope. It's hope. Expressing they've got hope they can get something done.

We urged you to use the Rescue Plan money to make communities safer, invest in affordable housing, get small businesses back on their feet, train your workforce, and you did. In Travis County, Texas, and Pierce County in the State of Washington, you're addressing homelessness by increasing the affordable housing stock, partnering with nonprofits to get the roots—to get at the root of the problem.

Ramsey County, Minnesota—and Ramsey County, Minnesota, is addressing the worker shortage in childcare and health care by training residents to become nurses and licensed childcare professionals. The American Rescue Plan also provided \$12 billion to address mental health needs arising from the pandemic. I know that addressing mental health is a priority for so many of you in this organization.

And by the way, one of the things I broke down—I had lunch with the Vice President today. And I keep little notecards about what I think we have to do. And I said: "We have to pass legislation on the damaging technology that's having an effect on our kids. We've got to change the way the internet works and the way people can—are able to use our children." It's got to stop.

Milwaukee County is using rescue funds to mentor kids involved in the criminal justice system. L.A. County is offering job training for kids in vulnerable populations. With the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act, the most significant gun safety legislation in 30 years, we're providing another \$10 billion to prevent violence and threat of—and threats resulting in human trauma. Two billion of that is for our young people in particular to pay for things like school counselors.

And as part of the unity agenda in the State of the Union, I called for a surge in resources to deal with fentanyl—the fentanyl epidemic that I know is devastating many of your communities. We now have a record number of personnel working to secure the border. We've now seized over 23,000 pounds of fentanyl just in the last several months.

But if we're going to have the strongest economy in the world, we have to have the strongest and best infrastructure in the world. We used to be number 1 in the world, now we're number—

we've moved to number 14. And China used to be number, I think, 10 or 11; now they're number two.

Folks, that's why I asked Congress to pass the bipartisan infrastructure investment act, larger than any investment made in infrastructure since Eisenhower's Interstate Highway System. A number of Republicans came together with Democrats to help us get it passed.

And we're rebuilding the country through the bipartisan infrastructure law. In your counties, we're investing in your roads, bridges, airports, public transit, water systems, high-speed rail, and so much more.

In Maricopa County in Arizona, we helped build a new bridge over the—over the Gila River. Look, in Warshaw—or, excuse me, Washoe County in Nevada, we're spending \$89 billion [million; White House correction] to add several lanes to the U.S.-395. In Maryland, Montgomery County and Prince George's County, replacing dirty diesel buses, which are bad for the health and environment.

With the leadership of Vice President Harris, we're partnering with you—you to deliver affordable high-speed internet to every single household so no parent has to sit in a McDonald's parking lot, for God's sake, so their children can connect to the internet to do their homework. We've already added 16 million more households with affordable internet. We're just getting started.

We're also making the biggest investment ever—ever—in climate through the Inflation Reduction Act, creating millions of good-paying jobs, investing in fence-line communities that have suffered the most as a consequence of being smothered by pollution. Think of "Cancer Alley" in Louisiana or, as the Delaware delegation can tell you, Route 9 in Delaware. They're going to be the first ones that benefit.

We passed the CHIPS and Science Act, which has led to a commitment of over \$300 billion—\$300 billion—in private investment in manufacturing. We're opening factories in your States to build semiconductor chips and electric vehicles and advanced batteries that's going to power those vehicles.

In my first 2 years in office, we created 800,000 manufacturing jobs. Where in the hell is it written to say we can't lead the world in manufacturing again? Where does it say that?

For decades, we imported projects and exported jobs because it's cheaper jobs overseas. And a lot of companies left. How many of you come from areas where you used to have a factory of four, five hundred people and everything got lost? They just picked up and took off overseas. What happens? It leaves a community devastated. They lose hope.

How many of you heard someone say to you: "Well, my daughter came up to me and said, 'I can't live here anymore, Mom. There's no jobs. I've got to move.'" Now, America is exporting products and creating jobs at home.

Today's report on inflation shows that the good news is that inflation in America is continuing to come down. It's fallen 7 straight months. There's more to go. Food prices at the grocery store are coming down. Gas prices are down \$1.60 since their peak.

Real wages for working Americans are up over the last several months, delivering welcome breathing room. As my dad used to say: "All I'm looking for, Joey, is just a little breathing room at the end of the month. Just a little breathing room. Have a little bit left over after I've paid all my bills."

We're seeing this progress even as unemployment remains at a 50-year low. We're going to have bumps in the road still. There's still more work to do as we make this transition to more steady and more stable growth. And there could be setbacks along the way.

That's why my unwavering focus is on continuing to lower costs for families, rebuild our supply chains, invest in America. Today's data reinforces what we have made historic progress and we're on the right track, and now we need to finish the job.

We're building the economy from the bottom up and the middle out so every county across America, not just as it works on costs—and in the coast-to-coast areas, but in the Heartland.

My plan I refer to as a blue-collar blueprint to rebuild America. We're creating good jobs you can raise a family on, and most don't require a college degree, jobs that people don't have to leave home in search of opportunity.

Let me just give you a few examples. Intel is going to invest \$20 billion on a thousand acres outside of Columbus, Ohio, that I refer to as a "field of dreams." They're going to build two "fabs," they call them—factories—that manufacture semiconductors, which, by the way the semiconductors were invented in America. You've got it? Invented in America.

Now, we're—we used to have 40 percent of the world's chips manufacturing. We're down to 10 percent because we forgot. Not anymore. Intel is going to create 7,000 jobs building that field of dreams: 3,000 working on the fabs, 4,000 building the facilities. The average salary at one of those factories is going to be roughly \$130,000 a year, and you don't need a college degree. You don't need a college degree for all of them.

That's building America from the bottom up and the middle out. But there's thirty—\$300 billion being invested. And now we're doing all this and so much more while cutting the deficit more than \$1.7 trillion in 2 years, the largest deficit reduction in American history, in my first 2 years in office. The largest.

You may have seen the spirited debate in my State of the Union Address. *[Laughter]* It was kind of fascinating. I felt like I was back on the playground. *[Laughter]* Some of my Republican friends in Congress—not all of them, but some of them—have been threatening to hold your economy hostage if we don't cut Medicare and Social Security.

When I called them out on this in the State of the Union, it sounded as though they agreed right then and there to take those cuts off the table. *[Laughter]* I sure hope so. If that's true—I'll believe it when I see it, but I hope that's true.

That's also when we see whether or not we're *[they're; White House correction]* going to plan to cut Medicaid and other programs critical to people.

Most of you have finally reached the point where your revenues are climbing and your budgets are stable. Most of you. And so I know that you share my concern that some in Congress are putting that progress at risk by threatening to have America default on its debt, which would be catastrophic for counties and the country. In fact, even coming close to default will raise borrowing costs and make it harder to finance key projects in your communities.

Ironically, nearly 25 percent of the entire national debt, which took 200 years to accumulate—so the national debt is 200 years old, accumulated over that period of time—25 percent of that debt was added in the previous 4 years of the last administration. Twenty-five percent of the 200 years of debt.

So I met with the Speaker of the House, who's a decent guy. He's got a tough job. He made it real clear to me what he wants to do. He says he's not going to raise any taxes at all on anybody. And he just wants to cut programs.

So I suggested, instead of making threats about the debt ceiling, we would—which would be catastrophic—let's just lay out our budgets. I'll lay out mine on March the 9th—exactly what I want to spend, who gets taxed, who doesn't get taxed, who gets—what programs get cut, what programs get added. And he should do the same. We can sit down and go—I mean it sincerely—go over it, see what they want to cut and see what we want to cut.

But here's the thing: If you add up the proposals that my Republican friends in Congress have offered so far—just so far now—legislation—they would add another \$3 trillion to our debt over the next 10 years.

Let me be specific. Here's how they'd do it. They made it clear in legislation they've introduced to—the investment we've made to crack down on tax cheats—billionaires and millionaires. The CBO says by doing away with that—those extra agents, we're going to cost the American public another \$114 billion in lost revenue.

We finally have made Medicare negotiate the drug prices. Well, they want to repeal that. They want to repeal the prescription drug savings and increase subsidies to Big Pharma.

Right now, for the first time in history—and I've been trying to do this for over 30 years—we pay the highest prescription drug cost of any nation in the world—any nation in the world. No one else is close.

So what did we do? We passed a law that said that in order to be able to—the Medicare, which pays billions of dollars in Medicare bills for everybody—Medicare should be able to negotiate drug prices. Say, "We will only pay you so much for that drug if you want to sell the drug to Medicare to give to people." Well, guess what? It passed.

Now, if that gets cut—[applause]—and by the way, you know, it's like—you know, when we talked about this bill being passed, everybody said, "Yes, and it promised that we were going to bring down drug prices and insulin." How many of you know somebody who has diabetes and needs insulin? Yes, a lot of you do. A lot of people.

Well, guess what? Those folks who need it were—including 200,000 kids—were paying somewhere between four and six hundred dollars a month. You know what they're paying now, as of the 1st of January? Thirty-five dollars.

And we're not cheating anybody. You know how much it costs to make that drug? Ten dollars. Packaging is another two. It was invented over 100 years ago. The man who invented it didn't even want to put a patent on it because he wanted to make it available to everybody. Well, guess what? It's coming down.

And guess what's going to happen? This year, the total amount of cost of the drugs you have to pay for, that you need, is now \$3,800. Next year, it will be \$2,000. You say: "What difference does that make, Joe? Who has those kinds of bills?" Anybody like my family. You know what—how much cancer drugs cost? Ten, twelve, fourteen thousand dollars a year. Nobody on Medicare will have to pay more than \$2,000 a year for all the drugs they consume. Nobody.

And guess what that's doing? That's saving the taxpayers \$159 billion a year. That's paying that much less out to Medicare recipients. Well, folks, you take that away, it raises the deficit \$159 billion. We passed a law to make sure corporations pay at least 15-percent tax.

Now, I come from the corporate capital of the world: Delaware. [Laughter] No, not joking. More corporations are incorporated in Delaware than every other State in America combined. The idea—for example, one of the reasons I was able to cut the deficit as far as I was able to do and have these programs available was simple: We said the fifteen—the 55 corporations of the Fortune 500 who made \$40 billion in 2020 had to pay at least a 15-percent tax. That's less than a nurse pays, a police officer, a street cleaner.

Well, guess what? It allowed us to pay for all this. Fifteen percent. And like I said, if you're a cop, you're paying 10-percent more than that. Look, we want to they want to repeal, again, that tax. They want to repeal the corporate minimum tax, which is 15 percent. If they do that, that will add \$222 billion to the deficit—if they repeal what we passed.

They want to repeal the 1-percent surcharge for stock buybacks. And let me explain most—I didn't know, years ago, what a stock buyback was. Well, it was a simple proposition. If in fact you—I—one of the big mistakes I made as a U.S. Senator—and it was well intended, like a lot of things. Like the nuns used to say, "The road to hell is paved with good intentions." [Laughter]

Well, you know, one of the good intentions I voted—with Bill Clinton, who is still a good friend—to say that no corporate man—no corporate president could make more than a million dollars from the profit of their—from the corporation they ran. Well, that incentivized everybody to get paid by stock—by stock buybacks.

So 90—I think it's 91 percent of all corporate execs are paid by stock—in stock. Well, what's the one way to increase your salary? Buy back your stock. It raises the price of the stock, raises the value. And the shareholders and you do well.

But guess what? You end up not investing in the—on the thing you're engaged in.

For example, in corporate America, you had the oil companies. Do you know how much they made in profit this year? Two hundred billion dollars in the middle of an energy crisis, because they bought back their stock and they're not investing in refineries, repairing them, or maintaining them.

Now, they're saying—and it's a legitimate argument they make. They say, "Biden, you want to go all—you want to go green. And in 10 years, we won't need this." Well, guess what? We're going to need oil for a long time and gas for a long time. It's not going to go all—go away.

But they're—look at all the refineries that are closed because they're not investing in the nature of the business they're involved in—is one example.

And so what did we do? We added a percent tax on a stock buyback. If you eliminate that, it's going to cost \$74 billion more on the deficit.

They want to extend the Trump tax cuts from the previous 4 years, which cost \$2.7 trillion to the deficit, and extend it. And guess who gets it? You all don't.

The point is this: I believe we could be fiscally responsible without risking—threatening to send our country into chaos. I believe it because we've been doing it.

When I introduce a budget 3 weeks from now, a few weeks from now—May—I guess, March 9—you're going to see we'll cut the deficit by another \$2 trillion in the next 10 years. And I'll lay it out in detail.

But here's the bottom line: I'm simply not going to let the Nation default on its debt for the first time in history. America is a nation that's paid its bill for the last 200 years.

And over the past 2 years, we passed historic amounts of significant legislation that actually grow the economy, increased jobs, increased access to health care, reduced the cost of prescription drugs. We're on our way to building the best infrastructure in the world again.

But as all of you know, the work doesn't stop here. So let's finish the job.

And I'm really optimistic for the year ahead as we implement the laws we've already passed. If we didn't pass another single thing, the things that are going to take place by implementing just the laws we passed last year are going to deliver real benefits to people that they're going to feel in their everyday lives.

Just like people now understand, since the Inflation Reduction Act was passed, seniors are only going to pay 35 bucks for a prescription of insulin. We're seeing the effects. It's going to change people's lives.

This is the work we're going to continue to do together, Democrats and Republicans. And we're proving, in every county in America, our best days are ahead of us. They're not behind us. This is the United States of America, for God's sake. There's nothing—I mean this sincerely—there's nothing we can't do.

We're the only nation in the world that's come out of every crisis we've ever met stronger than we went into it—the only nation that's ever done that. We're the only nation in the world. Because we have a resilient population.

America never gives up, never steps down, never backs away, never stops. I mean it. We have an incredible country, and there's nothing beyond our capacity if we do it together. And we're looking to the counties to being the key to getting it done.

God bless you all. Thank you, thank you, thank you. And may God protect our troops.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1:52 p.m. at the Washington Hilton hotel. In his remarks, he referred to Denise Winfrey, president, National Association of Counties, who introduced the President; Brian Fraser, Arielle D. Anderson, and Alexandria Verner, students, Michigan State University, who were killed in the shootings in East Lansing, MI, on February 13; Speaker of the House of Representatives Kevin O. McCarthy; and former President William J. Clinton.

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